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ABSTRACT

To date, principles of applied linguistics have been practiced little in the Chinese foreign language (CFL) classroom. Most students of Chinese, the majority of whom are in higher education, are not knowledgeable about linguistics. Most teachers of Chinese in the United States are hired for their interest in Chinese culture or native Chinese language skills, regardless of training in linguistic theory. Most instructional materials are market-oriented and not based on linguistic theory, unlike their recent counterparts for English second language instruction. The linguistic and traditional approaches to teaching CFL differ. Traditionally, foreign language instruction is closely linked to literature study, and classroom techniques are more influenced by individual style than by method. A serious defect of many college CFL curricula is that characters are introduced early in instruction, to the detriment of oral skill development. By contrast, a linguistic approach to teaching CFL recognizes the importance of speaking and emphasizes communicative competence, more appropriate to modern needs. A proposed CFL curriculum focuses on early learning of the system of syllables and tones, use of Romanized Chinese, and the contextual learning of words to reduce confusion about homonyms. Character study comes later. A relatively new communicative textbook is available. (MSE)

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Where Is Linguistics in the CFL Classroom

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Where Is Linguistics in the CFL Classroom?

1. The influence of linguistics upon three key elements of the CFL classroom

In spite of all the talks, the application of linguistic theories in language teaching remains largely a blue print in the CFL (Chinese as a Foreign Language) classroom. Such a claim, which seems to run counter to the general belief that linguistics has greatly influenced and improved language teaching, is not difficult to justify. One way of doing this is to look at the three major components of classroom teaching, namely, students, teachers and materials, and see to what extent linguistics has affected each of them. The outcome of such an examination will give a strong indication of how much a role linguistics plays in the CFL classroom.

After the discussion on the influence of linguistics upon the three key elements in the classroom, the differences between a linguistic approach and the traditional approach in teaching CFL will be highlighted. The final section of this paper is devoted to a brief description of some postulates in a linguistic approach to teaching CFL in light of the changes in the real world. While discussing teaching CFL in the US, examples from teaching EFL in China will also be cited for the purpose of comparison and contrast.

Of all forms of language teaching (as opposed to learning or acquisition) activities, the one that is most directly influenced

by the developments of linguistic science is formal classroom language instruction. Reasons for this is obvious: linguistics as a science is still primarily an academic discipline and, as such, it is more closely connected with academic activities rather than with all kinds of language learning activities going on beyond the campus. The extent to which linguistics affects each of these three components will then tell us how language teaching in the classroom is affected by the developments of linguistics. Although problems in CFL in the US will be discussed, this is not intended as a survey of the whole field.

First, let us look at the student body. It has been said that students should be the center of learning, including learning in a formal setting. This is true only in the sense that everything in the classroom should be planned with the students as the center of attention. When it comes to the effect of linguistic theories on language teaching, however, the other two elements, teachers and materials, are certainly more relevant. The backgrounds of language learners at the university level indicate that most of them are usually not well acquainted with linguistics. Many are actually ignorant of the field. The majority of them take language courses just to fulfil some kind of curriculum requirements (such as Asian Certificate Program). Given this lack of knowledge among the student body, it is highly unlikely that they will play any significant role in introducing linguistics into the classroom. Our discussion below, therefore, will concentrate on how and in what capacity linguistics has, or has not, affected teachers and

material preparations in the field of teaching CFL.

For the purpose of discussion, teachers of the Chinese language in the US can be divided into three categories according to their backgrounds. A full time faculty on the university level usually has a Ph.D. but not always in linguistics. Since I am talking about linguistics here, I will treat all those with a Ph.D. in linguistics as one category, regardless of their specific interests, be it phonology, syntax, semantics or any other field. One thing is clear about this group, they are well acquainted with the field of linguistics. The second category would be those who also have a Ph.D. in Chinese and not in linguistics. Regardless of their backgrounds, teachers in this category usually share a keen interest in China. Most of them major in the Chinese language or literature. In some universities, there are still quite a few language instructors or lecturers, including many of the part-timers. Teachers in this third category are usually native Chinese with various academic backgrounds. They are employed because of their native tongue --- Chinese. Though the number of this group is not impressive in percentage, they are the ones that are most directly connected with language teaching, with course names like Intensive Chinese, Beginning Chinese, Basic Chinese or any other names of the same nature.

Among teachers who are also linguists, there are some who may or may not know that part of linguistics that is closely related to language teaching. The great majority among the first category can be described as English linguists and Chinese teachers. Most

of these linguists get the job as a language teacher at the university because they are native speakers of the language. So in reality they are the same as the third category, except that they are trained in linguistics. They may know a lot about linguistics and publish in their field of specialty. Unfortunately, it is often the case that their publications in linguistics and their teaching in Chinese are two parallel lines that never cross each other.

Teachers with a degree in Chinese are in the same situation, in light of linguistic knowledge and its application in teaching, as the third category. Most of them are still trained by the literature-oriented method. They spent their years at the university learning the language or literature, and sometimes the history and the culture as well, but not linguistics. Since it does not require a teaching certificate to teach at the university level, teachers are on their own to dream up whatever method they can think of. For want of knowledge in methodologies based on linguistic theories, they fall back to what they are most comfortable with: teach their students the way their teachers taught them.

For teachers in the third category, some of them may have an interest in linguistics and some may not. This is the group that is typically underpaid and overworked. Due to the nature of their part-time positions (many of them are part-timers running from place to place to make ends meet), and to the lack of pressure for publication in the case of full time instructors, it is highly

unlikely that conscious efforts have been made, or researches have been carried out, to improve their teaching with help from the developments in linguistics.

It is one thing to talk about how linguistics affects teaching, and quite another to put into practice what linguists have said about teaching. Common sense tells us that a linguistic approach incorporating the insights of linguistics requires both knowledge of the field and conscious efforts on the part of the teacher. If we agree that the limitation of linguistic knowledge in the teachers themselves makes it difficult for them to consciously apply the linguistic principles in the CFL classroom, we will understand that the influence of linguistics on the most important element of classroom teaching, the teachers, is minimum.

Materials in CFL as used in the US can be divided into two periods, with 1979 as the dividing line. The pre-1979 period was dominated by textbooks compiled by a few Asianists in the US, like the Yale University series, with Beginning Chinese by De Francis and Twenty Lectures on Chinese Culture (TLCC) as the representatives. In recent years, more and more textbooks published in Mainland China, Taiwan and other sources are made available here in the US. Among the few that are used by many are Practical Chinese Reader (The Commercial Press, 1981, Beijing), Elementary Chinese Reader (Foreign Languages Press, 1980, Beijing), Speaking Chinese About China (Sinolingua, 1989, Beijing), Standard Chinese: A Modular Approach (Defense Language Institute, 1979, CA), Modern Chinese: A Beginning Course (The Great Encyclopedia Press

of China and the New Encyclopedia Press of Japan, 1982), etc. Like most of their counterparts in EFL, many of these textbooks are market oriented. Unlike their counterparts, many of them are not based on linguistic theories. In the US, Beginning Chinese by De Francis has dominated college curriculum for more than twenty years for want of other choices. However good a textbook it may be, it certainly does not reflect in any way the developments in linguistics. The influence of linguistics in this element in the CFL classroom is still minimum.

For linguistics to play an active part in the language classroom, at least both important components, the teacher and the material, should be linked to linguistics one way or another. From the discussion above, it is clear that the three major components of classroom teaching have not been influenced significantly by linguistics. The absence of linguistics among teachers and in materials leads to the assumption that the traditional approach to teaching still dominates the CFL classroom.

All the forth going discussion has been rather negative with regards to the influence of linguistics in the classroom on university campuses. the logic here is that, if all the three major elements in the classroom are little affected by linguistics, it is justifiable to claim that linguistics affects classroom teaching very little. To make such a claim is not the same as saying that linguistics has little effect on language learning.

From a macro point of view, the developments of linguistics have indeed affected language learning in almost every aspect.

Theoretical linguistics has done a lot to shape, or change people's view towards language. As we understand more about the inner structure of language, we are in a better position to answer a lot of questions during the learning process. Sociolinguistics directs our attention to the cultural side of any language. It also tells us the importance of extra-linguistic issues, such as the relation between what is said and what is meant. Computational linguistics has contributed to language teaching in the field of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), or Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI). As an example of many efforts in this direction, a feasibility study sponsored by the Defense Language Institute (DLI) is now under way to convert several courses in Chinese into CAI. Psycholinguistics leads to a much better understanding of the learner psychology and, as a result, to improved learning strategies. Neurolinguistics helps explain the mechanisms involved in the process of learning. Applied linguistics has perhaps the most direct influence in that it covers issues of classroom methodologies as well as principles of language acquisition.

If we focus just on the classroom teaching scenario, as I have done in this paper, it is difficult to be optimistic. While people's view of language has changed a lot and is still changing due to this fast developing field of linguistics, classroom language teaching remains more or less the same over the years. In other words, tradition is far from fading. Most of the publications concerning the influence of linguistics over language teaching, while very convincing and promising as research papers,

are not widely practiced in reality, or not to the extent it should be, perhaps.

2. Linguistic approach versus traditional approach

Among the differences between a linguistic approach and a traditional one is the focus of teaching. Is spoken prior to written or the other way round? How about production versus comprehension?

For many years, the study of a foreign language is closely associated with literature. As a result, reading knowledge is the primary concern of both teachers and students. The traditional approach to teaching is characterized by the three-step method, also known as the "trilogy". It starts with the study of the new words, which are either given before the text or after the text depending on the habit of the teacher and the design of the textbook. These words and expressions are to be explained and remembered. Then comes the text, which is taught usually sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph until the students understand what is said. The last part of the trilogy is the exercises to reinforce the vocabulary and the patterns learned in the lesson.

Different teachers may have different emphasis. In teaching the new words, some prefer giving many usages other than the ones that appear in the book, while others may "stick to the book", as they often say. When it comes to the text, some teachers require a word for word translation of the text to make sure that the students understand every word, others may focus on the whole

picture and favor just a jest. As for the exercises, some teachers like nothing but translation, putting from one language into the other the patterns and phrases learned from the text, others may have a variety of exercises, like filling in the blanks, sentence making, short composition, etc. The differences between all these approaches are still under the framework of the trilogy.

One serious defect common to the curricula of many colleges and universities is that, regardless of the different needs of the students, the introduction of characters, which is indispensable for reading comprehension, is compulsory from the first semester on. By the end of the second year, most students still have only a zero plus (according to the ILR scale as used by FSI) in speaking. They can hardly carry out a conversation in Chinese or use Chinese for any serious purpose of communication. Most of the time during the two years, which is usually the length of time for most students who are not majoring in Chinese, is spent on memorizing the characters. The total number of characters they will have learned at the end of the two years, however, comes to about only one third of what is needed to read newspapers.

If we state the negative side of the truth, it means that the student can neither talk nor read after two years of study at college. Linguists have long been in agreement now that instead of the written form, the spoken form of the language is regarded as the primary form of the language. The shift in opinion has certainly occurred in the linguistic circle, but not yet in the teaching circle. Should the teaching circle also accept the

findings from linguistics and recognize the primary status of the spoken form, more efforts would be given to help the students develop their communicative competence. The outcome then would be quite different.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, language serves the need of society. The study of foreign languages, as expected, will also serve the need of our time. The world today is quite different from the one fifty years ago, so is the purpose of learning Chinese. Instead of the written language, more and more people want to be able to speak Chinese for purpose of communication. Instead of reading comprehension, which enables them to appreciate Chinese literature, more and more people want to have the skills for production. They want to be able to use Chinese to talk to the native speakers, to write business letters, and so on. Given the changes in the real world, the purpose for studying foreign languages, Chinese being one for English speakers, is getting more and more practical. An informal need analysis reveals that, for many of the learners, the knowledge of the spoken form is all they want to know as the first objective.

In other words, the changing world also changes the purpose of many language learners. The traditional approach, with its focus on the written form of the language and its emphasis on comprehension rather than production, cannot fully meet the demands of the changing world. It does not take much linguistic training to realize that something must be wrong if we are still doing the same thing in the classroom as we did some fifty years ago.

The distinction between traditional and linguistic approaches in teaching CFL is not an either-or case, rather, it is one of more-or-less by nature. A linguistic approach recognizes the importance of speaking and emphasizes the communicative competence of the students. It can be explained from two aspects: the teacher and the material.

First of all, the teachers must be sensitive to linguistics issues. They have to realize that speaking is prior to reading and writing. Enough attention should be given to developing students' ability to communicate in Chinese. Moreover, it is the students that will do the talking whenever possible, and not the teacher who "lectures" from the beginning to the end, as is often the case in the traditional approach. In terms of materials, textbooks must reflect at least the changes of language, if not the developments in linguistics. Words, expressions and structures that are no longer current should be deleted from textbooks.

Such an approach coincides with the need of modern life. It also takes into consideration revelations from the theories of language acquisition and psycholinguistics. Sociolinguistics becomes important in the advanced stage of the learning process. For the relation between language and culture cannot be ignored if the learner is going to achieve near native competence. The role sociolinguistics plays in teaching Chinese at the advanced level is discussed elsewhere (Pan & Wu, 1991). What is learned in the traditional trilogy still has to be tackled, but perhaps in more ways than one.

In sum, a linguistic approach to teaching Chinese is based on the analysis of the language in terms of the linguistic science, which includes tools to study not only the inner language structure, but the relation between language and society as well. To adopt a linguistic approach means, first of all, to recognize the priority of the language, which is the spoken form. It also means to take into consideration the needs of the students. What they want to learn is more important than what the teachers, or some experts, think that should be learned. Simply put, if what the students want is the ability to use the language actively, to develop their communicative competence should be the first objective of teaching. From a micro perspective, it means to carefully analyze the linguistic features of the language and to carry out teaching activities according to insights from the analysis. Due to the different linguistic features of each particular language, it is to be expected that a linguistic approach to teaching may differ from language to language.

3. A linguistic approach to teaching CFL

Before I outline an approach which makes use of the insights from linguistics to be used in the CFL classroom, a few facts relevant to the present discussion about the Chinese language have to be mentioned.

Kangxi Zidian has about 47,000 characters and is believed to be the dictionary with most single entries, though many of them are now obsolete. *Cihai*, an authoritative table top dictionary

published in 1979 and serving the needs of various kinds in the contemporary society, has 15,000 characters. To function as a literate person (to read newspapers, for example), one has to know more than 3,000 characters, which will take several years of continuous study. A six-credit course (one semester) at Georgetown University introduces approximately 175 characters. Programs at different colleges and universities may vary, but the range is between 100 to 300. Even at the higher end of it, it takes about 5 years to reach the 3,000 goal, if we pretend that every character learned is remembered.

In order to speak the language, on the other hand, the situation is much simpler. There are only 416 basic syllables in the Chinese language. Counting the tones, the total number will be 1,295 (excluding 39 light tones). As said before, the purpose for learning a foreign language in this modern world, in contrast to that of ancient times, is communication in many cases and the tendency is growing. Due to the discrepancy between spoken and written Chinese, to obtain a knowledge of the spoken language requires only a small friction of the time needed for a reading knowledge.

During the acquisition of the spoken language, the major task is to make the link between the sound and the meaning, a similar process as in learning another Indo-European language. Once a workable knowledge of the spoken form is within the reach of the students, the task of studying the characters becomes much simpler. The only connection to make then will be the one between sounds and

characters. In other words, the process has been divided into two stages and each is given a primary task. Linguistic theories on the acquisition of the mother tongue certainly throws some light in this respect.

One major objection to the study of romanization of the Chinese language is the great number of homonyms. Since there is only a limited number of syllables, too many words will sound exactly the same, as shown in example A:

(A) Meanings of Common characters represented by *shi* without tone marks (see Appendix A for all the characters):

1. a teacher
2. to lose
3. a lion
4. to execute
5. wet
6. poetry
7. a corpse
8. a louse
9. ten
10. stone
11. to pick up
12. time
13. mixed
14. to eat
15. to erode
16. solid
17. to know
18. history
19. an arrow
20. to send
21. excrement
22. to drive
23. to start
24. type
25. to show
26. bachelor
27. life
28. persimmon
29. matter
30. to wipe away
31. to swear
32. to pass

33. power
34. to be
35. to have a liking for
36. to bite
37. fit
38. to be an official
39. to wait upon
40. to explain
41. decorations
42. surname
43. a city
44. to rely on
45. a room
46. to look at
47. to try

Even when tone marks are added, the confusion is still too great to handle, as in example B:

(B) Meanings of common characters represented by first tone *shi* (See Appendix B for the characters):

1. a teacher
2. to lose
3. a lion
4. to execute
5. wet
6. poetry
7. a corpse
8. a louse

While this is true theoretically, the real situation is not at all that bad. The Chinese syllable *shi* certainly represents a large number of characters. In modern Chinese, however, disyllabic words are the majority, with a percentage as high as 80% according to recent statistics. Unlike monosyllabic homonyms, disyllabic words which are exactly the same phonologically are few and far between. As a matter of fact, it is difficult, though not impossible, to find an example like C:

(C) Meanings of two disyllabic homonyms with first tone *shi*

as part of the words (See Appendix C for the characters):

1. *shishou*: accidentally (of an action)
2. *shishou*: to be captured (of a city by enemy)
Here are the two words in context:
- E1. Chinese: *Ta shishou dasui le yeye chabei.*
Gloss: he-accidentally-break-gw-one-teacup
English: He broke a teacup **accidentally**.
- E2. Chinese: *Nanjing shishou de shihou wo bu zai.*
Gloss: Nanjing-fall-gw-time-I-not-present
English: I was not in Nanjing when it **fell (was captured)**.

In the larger context of a sentence, as in examples E1 and E2 above, there is no ambiguity at all. This is closer to the real situation in life. People who believe the problem of homonyms to be the insurmountable difficulty often overlook the simple fact that language is always used in context.

Such an approach with the focus on the spoken form of Chinese and with help from *Pinyin*, though difficult to find on university campus for various reasons, is not totally new. Over the years, Foreign Service Institute (FSI) has been training diplomatic personnel using more or less the same method. One textbook in use, Standard Chinese: A Modular Approach is an example of the "non-character" approach. The length of the program varies from 16 to 92 weeks, with an intensive training schedule of 6 hours a day, five days a week. Their Chinese students, almost all of them working overseas as US diplomats, are confident when they speak Chinese at the end of a 44-week training. Many of them reach Level 2 (ILR Scale) in speaking. When they return for further training, which then includes characters, they usually have much less frustration and more success. On the university campus, tradition still holds on and the focus is still more reading than

speaking, thus more characters, more time, and to a certain degree, less results.

Another aspect of a linguistic approach can be viewed from the perspective of the textbook. For want of good examples in CFL, let's cite one from EFL and see how linguistics can be used in language teaching.

Influenced by linguistic theories on communicative competence, a group of linguists in Guangzhou Foreign Languages Institute compiled a textbook, called Communicative English for Chinese Learners (1988), or CECL, for the EFL classroom. The compilers made every effort to incorporate various insights of communicative theories into the organization, material selection and exercise design of the textbook. What matters most, however, was not just the material itself, but the efforts of the compilers to see to it that most of the linguistic features carefully woven in were used correctly by the teachers.

To achieve such a goal, all teachers who would use the book would meet every week and discuss teaching plans for every lesson during the trial period of the textbook, with the compilers available to either make the connection between the materials and the theory behind or to answer questions from teachers who were less sensitive to linguistic issues. Moreover, there were also control groups to see the different results of achievements from students who were not using CECL. Studies showed that students in the CECL class spoke more and with more confidence when compared to students from the non-CECL class. If there is any deliberate

effort to put into practice in the classroom certain linguistic theories, this is certainly one of them.

The CECL case is an example in which both the teacher and the material are linguistically oriented. If we agree that CECL can be regarded as a good example of linguistic approach to teaching EFL, we still have to look for one in teaching CFL. As mentioned earlier, the traditional approach to teaching Chinese is still characterized by the translation method in most of the US universities. Since reading is the primary concern, the connection being made in the classroom is still between character and meaning.

Starting with the influence of linguistics upon the three major components in a language classroom, I have highlighted the differences between the traditional and the linguistic approach in teaching CFL, and outlined some postulates for a linguistic approach. One of the point made during the discussion is that there is still a big gap between the theory of linguistics and the practice of language teaching in the CFL classroom. Why this is the case needs hardly any explanation. Limitation is the word that covers it all. Be it the limitation of the students, the teachers or the materials, it stands between theory and practice. What should be done again needs hardly any further discussion: more teachers who are linguistically oriented and more materials prepared under the guidance of linguistic theories. But how it should be done is a question that may have various answers.

Some people may argue for more linguists to get involved in

material preparation, while others may insist on the linguistic training of language teachers. Both may back up their own views by equally valid arguments. After all, these two elements are equally indispensable, though a linguistically oriented teacher with a poorly prepared textbook will most likely fare better than a poorly prepared teacher with the best book in the world.

The FSI approach with its emphasis on the ability to speak the language may throw some light on the university campus, though simply copy the practice may not lead to success. After all, the make-up of university students is quite different from the homogeneous student body of the FSI. The CECL case from the field of EFL in China, which focuses on both the material and the teachers, is also something in the right direction.

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